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SUBJECT: FIJI'S PREPARATIONS FOR THE PLANNED 2009 ELECTIONS
- OFF TO A SLOW START

REF: SUVA 145

Classified By: Ambassador Larry M. Dinger per 1.5 (B,D)

Summary

1. (C) While the Fiji Interim Government (IG) continues to give mixed signals about a March 2009 election, preparations are starting at a pace slower than donor countries would like. After months of delays, a New Zealand lawyer was named Supervisor of Elections April 17, to take up the job in early May. With the help of Australian and New Zealand electoral experts, the Elections Office has identified several opportunities for foreign assistance. The international community is willing to help, but wants to know how much the IG plans to invest of its own money. The Ministry of Finance (MOF) has not released FY 2008 funds allocated for staffing the elections office nor given any indication how much will be allocated for FY 2009. A massive door-to-door update of electoral rolls is scheduled for June, pending funding. The drawing of new electoral boundaries has yet to begin, though adequate data from the 2007 census is available. It appears the boundary-drawing process, which will take at least six months, will not reach high gear until final decisions are made about what form the electoral system will take (see reftel). While donor countries like Australia and New Zealand are concerned about IG inclinations to radically change the electoral system, there are no plans at present to stop technical assistance to the Elections Office and the Constituency Boundaries Commission. A cut off would play into the hands of IG officials who want elections delayed.
End summary.

Supervisor of Elections Named, A Technical
Assistance Coordinator Soon to Follow

2. (SBU) After months of delays, Fiji's Interim Government (IG) named New Zealand lawyer Dr. Maurice Coughlan Supervisor of Elections April 17. Australia is helping to fund the position but had no role in choosing Dr. Coughlan. Based on inquiries by Embassy Suva and AmConsul Auckland, Dr. Coughlan does not appear to be well known in government or legal circles in Fiji or even in his Auckland base. A sole-practitioner lawyer for the past 15 years, he reportedly spent several earlier years working for the PNG government and as a consultant in the region. Dr. Coughlan is scheduled to begin work in early May.

3. (SBU) Pio Tikoduadua, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Justice and chair of the Election Donors Coordinating Committee (EDCC), told EDCC members April 10 that the IG has accepted an EU offer to fund a "Technical

Assistance Coordinator" in the Elections Office. The EU assistance is untied, but the IG has indicated it wants a European to fill the position. Tikoduadua said the IG would announce the coordinator very soon, probably within the next few weeks.

The Elections Office is Working Hard; The
Constituency Boundaries Commission Is Not

¶4. (SBU) The Elections Office currently has 13 employees, including a competent Deputy Supervisor of Elections who regularly briefs donors on election preparations. The office plans to hire 38 more staff (for a total of 51), but has not yet received funds allocated in the FY 2008 budget to do so. Australia and New Zealand funded a visit of two electoral consultants in late February, early March. Their report laid out technical assistance and logistical support needs of the Elections Office, along with the pros and cons of various voter registration methodologies. Assuming the MOF releases funds, the Elections Office plans to hire 4,000 temporary staff to conduct house to house visits to update electoral rolls in June and July. After reviewing options presented by the two consultants, Fiji's Electoral Commission decided to update electoral rolls from 2006 instead of embarking on a far more costly effort to create new electoral rolls from scratch. Even so, updating will cost over FJ\$2 million (over USD \$1.4 million), more than half of the FJ\$3.5 million allocated to election preparations in the FY 2008 budget.

¶5. (SBU) While the understaffed Elections Office appears to take its tasks seriously, the same cannot be said thus far of the Constituency Boundaries Commission (CBC). The Chairman of the CBC, lawyer Suresh Chandra, told the EDCC April 10

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that the CBC is still in the process of setting up an office and a secretariat. Chandra noted that the MOF has only allocated FJ\$30,000 to the CBC to date, far below the sum needed to begin operations. (Note: Earlier in the year, CBC turned down a suggestion from EDCC Chair Tikoduadua to co-locate operations with the Elections Office.) New Zealand has offered technical-assistance help, but the CBC has not yet identified its needs. At the April 10 EDCC meeting, New Zealand again offered to work with the CBC to determine IT and software needs.

¶6. (SBU) At the EDCC meeting, Chandra agreed with comments by donors that the CBC has all the information, if not the technical expertise, it needs to start work. Provisional figures from the 2007 census have been available since last October, showing the locations of 488,000 eligible voters in Fiji. The final figures, said Chandra, will not be much different. (Note: A U.S. consultant working with the Fiji Statistics Bureau told us the same last week. He said final figures could be available within a matter of weeks, but the preliminary figures are sufficient to draw boundaries.) Chandra noted that the statutory requirements for redrawing boundaries require a 150-160 day process. If the Commission begins work by June, he said, it should finish by the end of the year.

¶7. (C) Comment: It appears very unlikely that the Boundaries Commission will seriously get to work until the IG makes a final, or close to final, determination about changes to the current electoral system. As noted reftel, the IG has endorsed a call by the People's Charter process to make major changes, perhaps moving entirely to open-seat constituencies under a proportional-representation, New Zealand model, and is planning to hold a "forum" in May to discuss next steps. The process of deciding on changes, and then "enacting" them through constitutional or other means could take months. Worries that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, the IG plans to delay elections are based, in part, upon the assumption that the CBC won't start work in earnest until electoral changes are finalized. End comment.

EDCC Chair Asks Finance to "Show Me the Money"

18. (SBU) MOF reluctance to release funds already earmarked for elections is clearly slowing the preparation process. At the April 10 EDCC meeting, Chairman Tikoduadua pressed MOF representatives on when FY 2008 funds earmarked for the Elections Office to increase staffing and update election rolls are going to be released. He also told MOF officials the EDCC urgently needs at least a ballpark estimate of how much the FY 2009 budget will allocate to holding elections. Without such an estimate, he asked rhetorically, "How can I tell donor countries how much we hope they can chip in?"

Donor Countries Wary of Proposed Election Changes,
but Remain Engaged

19. (C) Officials at the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions told us they intend to continue providing technical assistance to Fiji's Election Office and CBC despite any IG endeavors to change the election system. Cutting off such assistance would only provide the IG an excuse for delaying the elections. At present, most assistance has been in the form of technical expertise, payment of consultants' salaries, and provision of a limited amount of software and computers. Electoral education programs, implemented jointly by UNDP, the EU, and Fiji's Ministry of Education, are also ongoing. Neither Australia nor New Zealand has decided how much, if any, budgetary support they will give the IG to ensure the election takes place. (Note: That support would be placed in a special "trust fund" to be used only for election-related purposes.) Those funding decisions likely await how the IG addresses the election-system-change issue in the coming months.

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